



December 4, 2020

The Honorable Representative James White, Chair
Texas House of Representatives Committee on Corrections
Room E2.110
P.O. Box 2910
Austin, TX 78768

Via electronic mail to roel.benavides_hc@house.texas.gov

RE: Interim Charge 2: Examine gaps in services and assess efforts to connect justice-involved veterans, senior citizens, and homeless populations to services while incarcerated and after release at both the local and state levels. Specifically, the committee should evaluate training and technical assistance provided by the Texas Veterans Commission to criminal justice agencies.

Dear Chair White and Committee Members:

Thank you for giving the County of El Paso the opportunity to respond to the Committee on Corrections' interim charge 2.

El Paso County's Community Services Department operates a reentry support services program intended to assist individuals transitioning from incarceration back into the community to become self-supporting, productive citizens, thereby also reducing recidivism and improving public safety. Based on our reentry team's experience working with justice-involved veterans, senior citizens and homeless populations, some of the barriers these individuals face include lack of supportive housing, need for transportation to services they qualify for, need for mental health and/or substance use treatment, and assistance with obtaining basic documentation.

El Paso's own recidivism research has shown that even a few days in jail can have a significant negative impact on recidivism, and that the longer these people stay in jail, the more likely they are to return. This further supports the urgent need for targeted and strategic re-entry services. County-level intervention is critical for previously-incarcerated people as they navigate the legal system. Resources provided to these individuals by counties could assist in deterring these individuals from committing further crime. Unfortunately, however, step-down or transitional programs to assist previously-incarcerated people transition back into the community are rare at the county level.

Regarding need for assistance with obtaining basic documentation, state identification processes for individuals releasing from prison are not honored at the county level, leaving many justice-involved individuals releasing from county jails without a valid form of identification they need to secure housing, employment and other necessary resources. Take for instance one of our reentry team's clients who is 87 years old, states that he is a Korean War veteran, and is homeless. He had

no identification, and although he has many stories about his experience in the Korean War, his paperwork is untraceable. It has been difficult to connect with the proper channels to verify his veteran status, and thus connect him with services he qualifies for. This client's story is not unique. In its Oct. 1, 2020 report, the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services' Criminal Justice Workgroup¹ identified access to veterans' status for justice-involved veterans as an unmet veteran need statewide. They recommend better communication amongst state agencies to provide veterans information to county jails for the purposes of continuity of care and veterans benefits.

The Workgroup also spoke to incarcerated veterans' need for mental health, substance use, and peer support programing while in jail and upon release, and recommended increased collaboration amongst state agencies and local providers to support veterans in county jails. We believe such supports, regardless of veteran status, would help formerly-incarcerated individuals be more successful with reentry.

We recommend the Committee review the Workgroup's findings and recommendations in full.

We also refer the Committee to a veteran needs assessment, released this year and commissioned by the County and City of El Paso, El Paso Chamber of Commerce and other stakeholders, which speaks to several challenges faced by former service members in our region, including evidence of need for greater services to justice-involved veterans.² The County, its veterans advisory board, and area partners are working to identify solutions and best practices to address the issues raised in the needs assessment so that we can make El Paso the greatest community in Texas for military veterans and their families.

In sum, training and assistance provided by the state to criminal justice agencies, including county governments providing services to previously-incarcerated individuals, should be strengthened to achieve better results for these individuals both pre- and post-release.

Thank you again for this opportunity to offer comments. Please do not hesitate to contact the County should you have any questions.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "D F Collins". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "D F" being more stylized and the last name "Collins" written in a more standard cursive script.

Daniel F. Collins
Governmental Affairs Manager
County of El Paso, Texas

¹ See Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services, Fifth Report, Oct. 1, 2020, beginning at page 24, available at https://www.tvc.texas.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TCCVS-Final-Report_2020.pdf.

² See Combined Arms, El Paso, Texas Veteran Needs Assessment Survey Results Report, page 77, available at <https://bit.ly/32KcimD>.